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ABSTRACT

Three Rural Education Conferences sponsored during 1977 by the National Institute of Education proposed to find ways to strengthen the capacity of people at the local level to identify and solve their own education problems. The first conference focused on the nature of rural communities and the political, social, economic, and geographic variables which impact upon schools. Participants agreed that identification of problems and efforts to solve them should be initiated by those involved in and affected by the local education program, not by outside experts. The second conference explored the participants' experiences with a variety of programs designed to improve education in rural settings. Capacity building strategies derived from experiences related in the conference included: collaborative problem solving; community organization; regional information exchange and referral service; inter-agency coordination; associations of users; networking; and leadership development. School administrators and education decision makers added perspectives on rural school improvement in the third conference, identified critical elements that should be part of any strategy (community involvement, leadership development, and networking), and asserted that because rural settings are so varied, it may be more difficult to generalize across rural settings than across urban ones. Lists of participants in each conference are included. (NEC)

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CONFERENCES ON RURAL EDUCATION:

SCHOOL CAPACITY FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

Summaries

Washington, D. C.

1977

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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MEMORANDUM

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

TO : Participants of Conferences on Rural Education, NIE, School Capacity for Problem Solving

DATE: May 26, 1977

FROM : Caroline Smith CS
Charles Thompson CT

SUBJECT: Follow-up of Conferences

First of all, we want to thank you again for your participation in the series of small conferences on rural education. Your ideas and comments have been very valuable to us and we hope the meetings were interesting and useful to you as well.

Enclosed are copies of the summaries of the three conferences. Briefly outlined, the purpose of the first conference was to generate discussion on the nature of different rural settings and the relationship of schools and the communities they serve. The summary reflects that discussion among the participants. The second conference explored some of the experiences of people who have been involved in a range of rural education improvement efforts. Rather than listing or describing each program represented we chose to write an analysis of the different approaches to school improvement that were discussed. Therefore, the "summary" of the second conference is more of an analysis of change efforts as they were discussed, than a summation of the participants' comments. These analyses proved very useful to us in the development of the Request for Proposals and they are reflected in one of the attachments to the RFP. School administrators and education decision makers added their perspective on rural school improvement in the third conference. Their comments on their own experiences as well as on the analysis of improvement strategies from the second conference are summarized in the third report.

The conferences provided us with much useful information and many good ideas. However, they did not yield a consensus for future SCPS project initiatives to support the improvement of rural schools' capacity for local problem solving. This lack of consensus is primarily reflective of the great diversity of rural communities and schools. Rather than trying out a new approach at this time in a few places (e.g., the Rural Education Exchange as discussed at the conferences) we have chosen to solicit proposals for an initial study which would provide an indepth examination of current and past efforts to improve rural schools to build a more informed basis for future improvement or capacity building activity. The Request for Proposals, which outlines the nature and purpose of the study in much greater depth than we could here has been sent to you as of today under separate cover.

Again, thank you for sharing your experiences and observations. They provided a major contribution to the substance and goals of the RFP.

NIE/GSCPS
1/25/77

SUMMARY OF RURAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE #1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Group on School Capacity for Problem Solving is to find ways to strengthen the capacity of people at the local level to identify and solve their own education problems. One current planning focus is on approaches to building such capacity in rural areas.

Because we are relative newcomers to rural education, we felt it was essential to learn from people from all across the country with a variety of experiences in and perspectives on rural schools and communities.

Therefore, in a series of four conferences we are exploring potential strategies for rural school improvement by talking with (1) "students" of rural life who can convey a picture of the nature of rural communities; (2) people whose experience in education change efforts can tell us what has been tried, what has been learned, and what we might usefully do; (3) education practitioners against whose daily experiences we can test some potential strategies; and finally, (4) people from all these categories who can help transform the thoughts and experiences shared in the first three meetings into a set of strategies which might be "tested" in a few settings.

In the spring we plan to solicit proposals to try out one or more of the strategies. The details of this procurement are yet to be defined, pending the outcome of the planning process.

On January 7, 1977 the first conference was held. The participants focussed on the nature of rural communities—the political, social, economic, and geographic variables which impact upon schools. What follows is a summary of that discussion.

Localism

The point on which there was strongest and most general agreement was the primacy of localism: that the identification of problems and any change effort to solve them should be initiated by those involved in and affected by the local education program, not by "outside experts". ("Outside experts" included not only state and Federal officials, but academics, as well.)

Undemocratic Decision Making

Another view that was common, although expressed more strongly by some than others, was that educational decision making in rural areas is far from an open, democratic process. Several reasons were given:

1. Education in rural areas is often the largest local "business" (i.e., employs the most people, and represents the largest block of public money). Therefore, the decisions about schools in those situations often come from those with the strongest

political muscle, rather than those with genuine interest and concern about children's education.

2. Even though the local school board may be elected by the people, it may not represent the interests of the majority of local residents, but rather the local power structure. This may be more true in areas such as Appalachia, where political power is based on economic control orchestrated from outside the area.
3. Responsibility for decisions about educational programs is sometimes abdicated by local residents in favor of those with reputations as "professional experts" in education.

The Centrality of Political Factors

Some participants asserted that the most important factors in any change effort are political rather than technical. They argued that change efforts inevitably involve questions of power but frequently do not address these questions explicitly or adroitly.

"Conflict" Strategies

While there may have been some agreement that political factors are at least important if not absolutely central, there was sharp disagreement on the proper response to this perception. Some participants argued that in many communities, minorities and the poor are shut out of decision-making, those in power ignore their needs and preferences with impunity, and that the only way to effect needed changes is to organize the disenfranchised to wrest at least some measure of power from those who control the educational system.

Other participants expressed an equally strong belief that such community organizing or "conflict" strategies can have devastating consequences in rural communities, where people must continue to relate to each other face-to-face. They claimed that many communities had been torn apart by organizing efforts, and that the accomplishments had not been worth the price.

One participant despaired of community organizing strategies because in his view, no matter how skillful the organizer, the power structure is frequently just too strong. Some combination of "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies--putting on some pressure from the outside while working with those in power as well--seemed called for in these cases.

Relationships Within Rural Communities

1. Face-to-face interaction is the most common, effective way in which ideas are conveyed and information shared. People generally rely on others whom they know and trust for information and ideas.
2. Stratification--whether economic, social, or political--is a salient characteristic of rural communities. The form it takes and the specific factors that divide people differ from place to place. But the phenomenon is ever present.
3. In many rural communities, the school serves a variety of functions: gathering place, symbol of community identity, source of entertainment (sports, music, drama), as well as provider of formal education to the young. The relationship

between school and community is intimate and intricate. Interventions that disturb this web of relations--such as consolidation--may have profound unforeseen consequences. Improvement efforts have too frequently concentrated on the schools themselves, ignoring complex school-community relationships.

Consequences of Professionalization

One participant, a rural sociologist, pointed to the rise of professionalism as a major source of estrangement between schools and the citizens they are intended to serve. Over the past few decades, educators have developed a special language and what they and others perceive as special competencies. This language and these competencies--putative or real--tend to set them apart from and above other citizens. It becomes increasingly difficult for educators--who look to the profession for their norms, values, and ideas--to communicate with other citizens, who do not share in this culture. The result is estrangement--open conflict or silent alienation.

With professionalization has gone specialization, which has compounded the division split between professionals and lay people by creating splits between different categories of professionals--teachers from administrators, practitioners from researchers, and so forth. The boundaries between these specialties may also be the boundaries of interaction.

Finally, specialization among teachers along subject matter lines may mean that no one in a school really knows and relates to the "whole child" the way a teacher in a one-room school was forced to.

These changes have pervaded the entire society, but they have been felt especially strongly in rural schools.

Population Trends

An important trend affecting rural communities is the dramatic turnabout in population movement. Most rural areas are now actually gaining rather than losing people. This trend has a number of effects on the education system. Among them are these:

1. Newcomers bring new ideas and new values. This frequently leads to conflict between long-time residents with "traditional" views and newcomers with more "progressive" views. Sometimes this conflict undergoes an ironic reversal as "back to the land" types seek to traditionalize and old-timers seek to modernize.
2. The growing tax base that goes with development may lag behind population influx. Thus, there are demands for new services and expansion of existing facilities and services before there is money to pay the bills.

Distance and Isolation

One trait that is common to most rural communities is distance and isolation. Where urban schools may be only blocks apart, rural schools are often miles apart. Thus, the sharing of ideas among schools,

and between school staffs and citizens, is an involved and expensive matter. With this go limitations on acceptance of ideas because interpersonal relationships often form the basis for information sharing and receptivity.

Local vs. Cosmopolitan Culture

A participant who has studied a major Federally-supported change effort over three or four years said that the project had demonstrated the extreme difficulty which "outsiders" experience in trying to work with rural people on their own terms. A major source of difficulty is the sharp difference between local rural cultures and the cosmopolitan cultures which condition the behavior and views of "Feds" and other outsiders.

The people who stand in greatest need of help may be least able to deal with cosmopolitans. As a result, they are frequently ignored or "ripped off". People from a nearby university or a consulting firm may effectively take over a project by presenting an elaborate, well-articulated, and expensive plan which seems so convincing and so superior to the locals' own halting efforts that the locals lack the confidence to reject it. Or the Federal officials in charge may be unable to resist stepping in to "fix" a project that seems "too slow" or "unsophisticated" for their tastes. And once more, local people find themselves losing control of their own institutions.

On Community Change

One participant with community organization background stated: "You can't buy change". Education improvement programs of the past have adequately demonstrated that. The provision of additional resources without an accompanying shift in the control of decisions usually results in more of the same.

In the community organization approach the support of people or organizations with clout is critical to the success of any change effort. Multi-issue organizations tend to be more successful at cultivating that kind of support than are single-issue organizations. Whereas the latter are constrained in focus, prone to specialization, and limited in support, multi-issue organizations tend to move with the emergent and changing concerns of local people and allow for wider participation.

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SUMMARY OF RURAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE #2

The second conference on Rural Education explored the participants' experiences with a variety of programs designed to improve education in rural settings. Rather than review the conference discussion, we thought it would be useful to provide a descriptive analysis of various capacity building strategies derived from the experiences related in the conference. The strategies presented here are not perceived to be exclusive of one from another, in fact many are combined in practice. This format merely gave us the opportunity to explore different facets of capacity building efforts.

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Capacity Building Strategies: Collaborative Problem Solving

View of "The Problem":

Educational administrators frequently set goals, identify problems, and choose solutions in an unsystematic manner and without significant participation from the people who are directly affected--teachers, parents, and students alike. As a result, policies often conflict with community sentiment, the wrong "problems" receive attention, and inappropriate or ineffective "solutions" are chosen. All important groups that have a stake in education should have a say in decision making. And the "stakeholders" should learn to use systematic processes to identify and address problems. Both increased participation and increased "rationality" are needed.

Assumptions:

. Educational problems are partly political problems. Including the disenfranchised along with the already powerful will increase attention to the problems, interests, and values of poorly served groups.

. Educational problems are partly technical or intellectual. Deliberate, systematic processes for identifying and addressing problems increase the likelihood that improvement efforts will be effective.

. Administrators and school boards are willing to share their power with teachers and parents.

. Professional educators and parents can learn to work together as equals.

. Diverse constituencies, sometimes with conflicting agendas, can find ways to collaborate or at least to compromise.

. Effective procedures for goal-setting, problem identification, etc., do exist and can be taught to groups of educators and citizens.

Strategy:

Train people in group process and problem solving skills and make them available to help rural communities organize and operate citizen-educator problem solving groups.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

. Consistent with both "responsiveness" and "rationality" diagnoses of the problem.

. Consistent with basic democratic values.

. Draws on broader range of community resources than is normally the case.

. May increase public support for education.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Are administrators and school boards generally willing to share power with teachers and citizens?

. Can professional educators and parents in most communities learn to work together effectively?

. Can diverse constituencies collaborate?

. Training group process "facilitators" and making them available to rural communities can be an expensive business. Will state, regional, and local education agencies pick up the tab?

Capacity Building Strategies: Community Organization

View of "The Problem":

The people who control the education system have a vested interest in protecting the status quo. They have little interest in improving services for the poor, minorities, and otherwise disenfranchised people; or they are actively prejudiced against these groups. The real problems in effecting educational improvement are political rather than technical. Until the disenfranchised gain power, little meaningful change will occur.

Assumptions:

Certain categories of people are ill-served by the existing educational system but lack the political power to compel the system to attend seriously to their needs.

If these people were to gain and exercise power, the educational system could respond reasonably effectively to their demands.

People with certain community organizing skills can help the disenfranchised get together to exert pressure on "the system". Community organizers can also impart the skills which the disenfranchised need to be effective.

Strategy:

Employ a community organizer to build political strength and skill among the disenfranchised.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

Takes account of political forces that are frequently ignored in change efforts.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

May heighten conflict, "tear communities apart" without accomplishing goals.

Under what conditions, if any, is this a legitimate activity for a Federal agency to support? Under present conditions, is it politically feasible for NIE?

Capacity Building Strategies: Regional Information Exchange and Referral Service

View of "The Problem":

People in rural school systems lack easy access to research results, the products of development efforts, information on "promising practices", and good ways to solve common problems.

Assumptions:

. Lack of information is a key obstacle to successful improvement efforts.

. People have the will and capacity to use such information if only it were available.

. Such information exists, but it is frequently not in a really usable form. Nor do people in rural systems have easy access to it.

. People in some communities have developed "solutions" to problems which confront other communities. The latter could profit from the experiences of the former.

Strategy:

Establish a regional (sub-state) information exchange that collects relevant information, transforms it into usable form, and helps match information to problems. Exchange also refers people to others with relevant experiences.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

Appears both technically and politically feasible.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Does potentially useful information exist in rural education?

. Is there a demand for such information?

. Could people use it effectively?

. Is information key to educational improvement efforts?

Capacity Building Strategies: Inter-Agency Coordination

View of "The Problem":

In most rural communities, each government agency operates in isolation from the others, providing more or less good service in its own area of concern, but without a sense of the total community's needs and its relationships to the variety of agencies and programs that exist to address these needs. Rural communities, even more than suburban and urban areas, are "of a piece". Everything is interconnected. Yet the structure of government agencies and services does not reflect this. Dealing with education in isolation from other dimensions of community life is futile at best and destructive at worst.

Assumptions:

. Agencies can be persuaded to give up a "turf"-centered approach in favor of a community-centered approach.

. If agencies orchestrate their efforts within a general plan for community development, they can move effectively on the community's problems. Far more effectively than if they continued to work in isolation from each other.

Strategy:

Organize interagency councils and provide money and technical assistance for them.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

. Students of rural life and rural educators seem to agree that all dimensions of life in rural communities bear on all others. This strategy takes some account of that.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Can agencies really move more effectively on community problems if they orchestrate their efforts, or will more resources be expended in an effort to promote coordination than are justified by the results?

. Can they be persuaded to do so?

. Are formal councils or committees the best mechanisms to increase coordination?

Capacity Building Strategies: Associations of "Users"

View of "The Problem":

Researchers work on problems of theoretical interest to themselves, frame their work in ways that make sense to them, and report it in forms and forums appropriate to them. But from an educational practitioner's point of view, they choose the wrong problems, frame them in the wrong way, and report the results in inappropriate language and inaccesible reports and journals. The work of researchers and developers must be re-oriented to the needs of practitioners.

Assumptions:

. People with the talent and knowledge to perform useful research exist, and could be enticed or persuaded to orient their work along more practical lines.

. Practitioners could identify problems on which research could usefully be performed. Lack of such research is a major obstacle to educational improvement in rural areas.

. People are likely to feel "ownership" of research which they have commissioned themselves, and are therefore more likely to use the results.

Strategy:

Organize associations of practitioners and citizens who can identify problems, commission research on them, and use the results. Provide some money to support the research.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

. Idea that increased ownership would increase utilization has a certain appeal.

. Resembles what Donald Schon has called an "inductive policy system" for R&D. That is, needs and problems are identified at the grassroots level, and government responds to these.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Is the lack of research and development work related to practitioners' real problems the major, or at least a major obstacle to improvement?

. Do people with the talent and knowledge to perform useful research now exist? If so, could they be re-oriented toward the problems of practitioners?

Capacity Building Strategies: "Networking"

View of "The Problem":

When educators are confronted with a problem or a decision, they generally prefer to rely on others whom they know and trust as sources of information and advice. Yet, a given person's "network" of contacts is likely to be limited in a variety of ways. It may be narrow and parochial, serving mainly to reinforce outmoded or ineffective ways of doing things. It may "contain" too little knowledge or information. It may bolster the power of a few people at the expense of the many. Ways of strengthening and extending "natural" or "informal" networks without destroying them must be found.

Assumptions:

. Natural, informal social networks are powerful influences on the behavior of educators.

. Education is more properly viewed as a social craft than as an engineered technology. It is better developed by providing opportunities for exchange among the craftsmen and women than by developing new "components" for installation.

. Many formal "networks" or dissemination systems fail to take account of either of the above two assumptions. Elaborate, engineered systems are unlikely to be helpful. They are consistent with neither the preferred communication style of most educators (informal, face-to-face) nor the nature of the education process (craft-like).

. It is possible to augment the natural flows of communication without polluting them or drying them up.

. Networks can provide the stimulation and support as well as the resources (ideas, experiences, "solutions" for adaptation) necessary to initiate and sustain improvement efforts.

Strategy:

Map the informal networks and their relationship to the formal education system in a few communities. Look for fragmentary informal networks that have vitality and promise. Provide resources and help to increase exchange within and among these nets. Help them find sympathetic people in resource agencies (community colleges, RESA's, etc.), in the formal system, and the community power structure. Facilitate communication with these people.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

. Notion that informal networks are very influential rings true to the experience of many people concerned with rural education.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Can deliberate "networking" strengthen and extend informal network? Or will efforts to do so kill them?

. Is intervention to strengthen nets a potentially powerful strategy, or relatively weak?

Capacity Building Strategies: Leadership Development

View of "The Problem":

People running the education system are too preoccupied with operational matters to mount improvement efforts without extra prodding and resources. Or, their interests lie in protecting the status quo. Or, they lack specific leadership characteristics and skills. Or some combination of these conditions obtains.

Assumptions:

. A dedicated, energetic, intelligent person with a certain natural flair for leadership can identify important problems, mobilize others to address the problems, find and draw on resources, and sustain problem-solving efforts through inevitable obstacles and setbacks.

. Potential leaders of this sort exist in most communities or other settings. They do less than they might because they lack confidence, knowledge, skills, "contacts" or some combination of these factors.

. It is possible to identify these people and to develop their latent leadership abilities, building on their strengths and providing individualized training or experience in areas of weakness.

Strategy:

Identify people who are rooted in local communities, who posses leadership potential, and who want to develop that potential. Provide training, experiences, and some form of continuing "support system" for them.

Advantages, Interesting Features:

Appears to provide way of focusing effort, source of energy for effort, needed competencies--all at relatively low cost.

Questions, Potential Problems, Disadvantages:

. Should potential leaders be selected only from outside "the system", or only from within the system, or without prejudice in this regard?

. May select and develop people who are, or are perceived to be, "on a tear"--pursuing a personal agenda not reflective of community values or in the broader community's interests.

. Is this a legitimate activity for a Federal agency to support? Is it politically feasible?

Summary of Rural Education Conference #3
School Capacity for Problem Solving Group
National Institute of Education

The third SCPS conference on rural education, held on February 8, 1977, provided an opportunity to consult with several education practitioners and decision makers about their experiences and observations of various approaches to building problem solving capacity in rural schools and systems. The range of perspectives represented in the conference included those of a former chief state school officer, an SEA staff member with extensive experience in rural schools, the president of a state college, a district superintendent, a state legislator, the director of a regional cooperative services agency, and the director of a private research and development organization.

Because the conference was designed to contribute to our planning for a research initiative in rural education, the framework for the day's discussion was a summary of various improvement strategies which we had distilled from the two previous conferences. Rather than discussing each of the strategies specifically, the participants were more inclined to use them as a springboard for their own observations and ideas. The following is a summary of the discussion.

States' Role

Several of the participants had been most recently involved in education at the state level and their comments reflected a general concern about the role of the state (SEA) in any local capacity building effort. On Federal-State-local partnerships in building local capacities for problem solving the following views were expressed:

- Some SEA's are weak and do not have the capacity themselves to lend support to local efforts at building organizational capacity, thus local efforts are sometimes thwarted.
- States have the constitutional responsibility for education. Any attempt by a Federal agency to enter into a partnership with a local education agency which bypasses the SEA represents an unwarranted, counterproductive intrusion on the state's prerogatives and responsibilities.
- State legislatures play an important role in educational improvement. Their actions range from establishing tax structures for financing education to setting miminum standards for school operations. This latitude permits legislatures to impact on the nature as well as the delivery of local educational services.
- The SEA can establish a climate for promoting local problem solving by shifting its focus from regulation of LEA's to provision of service and support to them. Montana was cited as an example where, under the leadership of Dolores Colburg, the SEA was transformed from a primarily regulatory to a primarily facilitative agency. Title V funds were used to develop SEA staff capability to function as consultants in local education agencies' "School-Community Process" partnerships.

SEA consultants worked with local schools by invitation, the program being completely voluntary with no additional dollar allocations. The long term SEA conversion process not only

instituted a new operational style, but involved the internalization of new goals—"thinking community involvement"—before the refocusing effort could be successful. SEA staff also embraced the attitude that if any change was to take place it had to be conceived and born at the school site rather than at the district, region, or state levels.

Climate for Local Improvement Efforts

There was general agreement with the following assertions regarding the climate for change:

- "Readiness" and timing are critical for any improvement effort. A community must be "in the mood" before significant changes can take place.
- National media have a strong influence on the local perception of educational issues. Problems identified at the local level often tend to mirror generalized "national" attitudes rather than problems that are specific to the local situation.
- Citizens need better access to more understandable information about what is taking place in schools, and what needs to take place as viewed through education research and development.
- Compared to State or Federal levels the individual school with its stakeholders is the level at which one must focus if capacity building efforts are to succeed.
- Rural schools and communities may not require uniquely rural improvement strategies, but the specific form which strategies must take will differ sharply from urban to rural settings,

and almost as sharply from one rural community to another. Because rural settings are so varied, it may be even more difficult to generalize across rural settings than across urban ones.

Critical Elements of a Capacity Building Strategy

Although capacity building strategies may take several different forms, the participants identified three critical elements that should be part of any strategy: community involvement, leadership development, and networking.

Views on Community Involvement:

- Participants differed over ways of mobilizing citizens to make deliberate decisions. Should local concerns be identified through community involvement or should community involvement be stimulated by particular problems? The former was more closely associated with comprehensive capacity building while the latter was viewed as being easier to achieve. The question was viewed as a central issue in capacity building efforts.
- Wide community involvement in needs assessment and planning frequently results in unrealistic expectations as to what can be accomplished, and leads to disenchantment among community participants. Broad community involvement also ignores individual skills and interests which could otherwise be useful.
- There was general agreement that community involvement should be implemented by involving people with interests and skills in specific areas rather than a more generalized approach.

- The traditional differentiation of roles creates problems with the community involvement process. A common notion is that parents should decide goals and professionals should make decisions about implementation and follow through. Capacity building efforts need to minimize that differentiation.
- The point where community involvement usually stops short is in the daily, continuous operation of schools.

Views on Leadership Development

- Local leadership is critical in sustaining community interest in educational improvement.
- A problem of capacity building in rural settings is the transience of professionals. "Outsiders" (those recruited because of their leadership skills) are sometimes effective over a short range, but the difficulty is that they tend to move on, leaving no sustained capacity behind.
- Second level leaders (e.g., the assistants to a superintendent, a CSO, or a principal) should be viewed as important local leadership roles.
- An important factor is whether education professionals as leaders are comfortable in sharing their decision making powers with community residents.

Views on Networking:

Although networking was cited as an important, useful element in capacity building it tended to be defined within the parameters of resource and information sharing rather than as a way of promoting informal sharing and support of new ideas and individual skills.

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